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ABSTRACT

While recent research in cognitive development suggests that the period from birth to age 3 provides a unique opportunity for interventions to change the life-course of children, there is great disagreement regarding the best means of allocating public funds toward early childhood intervention. Further, there is little research into the long-term effects of early education programs for disadvantaged children. This report summarizes the remarks of three nationally recognized scholars discussing these and other topics at a Congressional Research Briefing "Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What Are the Costs and Benefits?" Jeanne Brooks-Gunn's remarks explain the structure of early childhood programs and the nature of their short-term impacts on child development, and provide an assessment of early childhood at the optimal point of intervention. Janet Currie's remarks focus on the long-term impacts of early interventions, such as academic attainments as well as program costs and benefits. Douglas Besharov's remarks examine the research literature and offer policy alternatives to Head Start programs. (KB)

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Congressional Research Briefing Summary

EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERVENTION PROGRAMS: WHAT ARE THE COSTS AND BENEFITS?

May 10, 2000

Early childhood intervention programs aim to produce both short- and long-term benefits. While recent research in the field of cognitive development suggest that early childhood, specifically the interval from birth to age three, offers a unique opportunity for interventions to change the life-course of children, there is great disagreement regarding the best means of allocating public funds towards early childhood intervention. Experimental preschool programs and large-scale publicly funded interventions such as Head Start, target disadvantaged children to improve school readiness; however, although the short term benefits of these programs are well documented, there has been little research into the long-term effects of these programs. At what age should intervention be introduced? Who should be targeted for intervention? What should be the nature of intervention and should it be conducted by means of educational programs only? These and other pivotal topics were discussed at a May 10 Congressional Research Briefing **Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What Are The Costs And Benefits?**[1] organized by the Northwestern University/ University of Chicago Joint Center for Poverty Research[2] (JCPR) and sponsored by Chairman Nancy Johnson (R-CT) and Ranking Minority Member Benjamin Cardin (D-MD) of the Subcommittee on Human Resources, U.S. House Committee on Ways and Means.

The briefing highlighted research from three nationally recognized scholars, who discussed the nature and policy implications of the latest academic research on early childhood intervention programs, including Columbia University Developmental Psychologist Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, UCLA Economist Janet Currie, and Douglas J. Besharov, a Professor at the University of Maryland School of Public Affairs and Resident Scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Brooks-Gunn explained the structure of early childhood programs and the nature of their short-term impacts on child development. She also provided an assessment of early childhood as the optimal point of intervention. Currie focused on the long-term impacts of early interventions, such as academic attainments as well as program costs and benefits. Besharov examined the research literature and offered policy alternatives to Head Start programs.

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn
Columbia University

Researchers have found associations between family income levels and children's cognitive development, achievement, and behavior during the preschool period, beginning at around two years of age and continuing through age five.[3] Income during the early years of life is associated with high school completion rates. This link, however, does not hold for middle childhood or early adolescence. These effects are most pronounced for children who are persistently poor and for those who are experiencing deep poverty, but are not limited to those below the poverty threshold. Further, these effects do not diminish, and may actually increase, during the elementary school years because elementary school education does not ameliorate the academic differences found between children of varying social economic status (SES).

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[1] For more information on this briefing, visit www.jcpr.org/conferences/oldbriefings/childhoodbriefing.html

[2] The Joint Center for Poverty Research is a national academic research center that supports high quality policy-oriented research on domestic U.S. poverty and inequality. The Center receives core funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and is affiliated with the Irving B. Harris Graduate School of Public Policy Studies at the University of Chicago and with the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University. More information about the JCPR may be found online at www.jcpr.org/.

[3] For more detailed information, request a copy of "Do You Believe in Magic? What We Can Expect From Early Childhood Intervention Programs," by Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Director of the Center for Children and Families, Teachers College, Columbia University via email: jb224@columbia.edu.

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One of the goals of childhood intervention programs is to diminish the SES disparities in the preschool years so that poor children enter school on a more equal footing to their more affluent peers. Policy research confirms this goal: early intervention programs have the potential to alter poor children's achievement in elementary school. Almost all of the programs that have reported positive results have involved center-based early childhood intervention. The effects of early childhood intervention diminish over time[4] but are still significant.

Because the cost of early childhood intervention services is based in part on the child's age and the duration of the intervention, we need to determine if effectiveness of the intervention is dependent on the child's age at program entry. From a comparative perspective, early childhood intervention programs have larger effects—by one-half to three-quarters—than later interventions. Moreover, the effects of early interventions continue through elementary school and have greater impact (by one-third to one-half) than the immediate effects of other, later interventions. Brooks-Gunn observes that early intervention programs have short-term effects that are larger than what we have seen in other areas of human services research. However, she stresses that policy makers would be greatly mistaken if they believe that offering early childhood intervention for two years will permanently and totally reduce SES disparities in children's achievement.

Janet Currie
University of California, Los Angeles

Much of the current enthusiasm for large-scale publicly funded early intervention programs is based not on evidence of the effectiveness of these programs but on evidence from model early intervention programs and on two theoretical arguments: (1) if effective means of prevention could be developed, they would be more cost effective than attempts to treat after the fact; and (2) recent studies suggests that early childhood is a key period for cognitive development. Since there is little consistent evidence regarding the effectiveness of public early childhood programs, determining which policies the government should pursue to improve the quality of early intervention programs is hotly debated. Short-term goals include providing a secure, stimulating environment or nutritious food to children who lack these essentials, and Currie points out that the short-term benefits of programs like Head Start already pay back much of the cost of the programs. However, many would argue that the ultimate goal of early intervention is to produce "better" adults who have increased school attainment and earnings while decreasing welfare dependency. It is often difficult to track these long-run outcomes of interventions; therefore evaluations generally focus on intermediate goals, such as producing children who enter elementary school "ready to learn."

Currie outlines guidelines for early intervention program design,[5] of which the publicly funded Head Start program is the most widely implemented. First, while it may be useful to intervene before three years old, interventions for preschool and school age children can also be effective. Thus, the first three years should not be emphasized at the expense of interventions aimed at older children. Second, the effects of early intervention have often been found to be larger for more disadvantaged children, which provides a rationale for targeting these children. Third, the most important aspect of quality is likely to be the nature of the interaction between the teacher and the child. Small group sizes, better teacher training, and other measurable aspects of quality all make such interactions more likely.

As suggested by Currie, it would be good public policy to fully fund Head Start so that all poor children could participate and to extend it to a full-day, full-year program. It might also be a good idea to extend eligibility to some groups of children who are not poor, such as those at risk of abuse or neglect; children

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[4] That intervention effects diminish over time has been called the "fade out" effect. Brooks-Gunn cautions that the term is misleading because it implies that children who received early childhood intervention look the same as those who did not.

[5] For more information, download a copy of "Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What Do We Know?" by Janet Currie, at www.jcpr.org/conferences/oldbriefings/childpaper.pdf

of high school dropouts; and children with limited English language proficiency. The available evidence sheds less light on the wisdom of establishing a universal public preschool program. Such a program would provide a substantial child care subsidy to many middle-class as well as lower income families, rather than targeting benefits primarily towards the neediest children. However, such a program might enjoy greater popular support than one targeted only to needy children.

Douglas J. Besharov
University of Maryland School of Public Affairs
Besharov cautions that vast amounts of public funds are being spent on early childhood intervention programs that may not be effective, stressing that a clearer view of the "facts" might lead policymakers to support alternative educational and anti-poverty efforts.[6] Besharov thus suggests such initiatives as expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and offering financial incentives for part-time employment. Nonetheless, he stresses that supporting these alternative programs and initiatives would be an uphill battle due to their lack of political support.

Between 1994 and 1999, combined Federal and state funding for Head Start and welfare-to-work efforts increased from $8.7 billion to $14.6 billion (in 1999 dollars). In FY2000, total Federal spending on Head Start will exceed $5.2 billion. It is important to note, however, that much of the increase in Head Start funding was earmarked for "quality improvements," which mainly went to salary increases and new buildings. As a result, per child costs increased dramatically, while the total number of children served did not. For example, in 1992, the per child cost for Head Start was $3,546, compared to $5,288 in 1998. Per child costs increased by nearly 50%, while the number of children served increased by only 30%.

Although Head Start enjoys wide popular and political support, surprisingly little rigorous research has been conducted on the program's impact. There have been no studies using either a nationally representative sample or an experimental design – two factors that make it difficult to draw any conclusions about the programmatic effects. A study conducted by the General Accounting Office in 1997 stressed that "Until sound impact studies are conducted on the current Head Start program, fundamental questions about program quality will remain." Based on this lack of rigorous research, Besharov argues that we should not decide to put more disadvantaged children in Head Start without first recognizing that Head Start is not suited for everyone, and cites mothers who work as one example. Only 7% of Head Start programs offer care for eight or more hours per day; 51% offer care for four hours per day or less. Most of the mothers whose children are in Head Start do not work full time, and many do not work at all. Thus, before deciding that we need to put more disadvantaged children in Head Start, we should ask where they are now. Many are already in some form of child care.

Incurring additional costs for either "quality child care" or expanded early childhood programs might be acceptable if they achieved the results claimed by their proponents, but there is only weak evidence that they do, and substantial reason to think they do not. Besharov suggests it may well be that there are better ways to spend $10,000-$15,000 per child to improve child outcomes. Several alternatives he suggested include: expanding the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) so that mothers have more income; removing the marriage penalty embedded in the EITC and other quasi-welfare programs; or offering financial supports that would enable part-time work so that mothers can spend more time with their children.

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[6] For more detailed information, download a copy of "April 11th Statement of Douglas J. Besharov Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Subcommittee on Children and Families" at http://www.jcpr.org/conferences/oldbriefings/besharov.pdf